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JAMES YOUNG GEDDES (1850–1913): A RE-EVALUATION

James Young Geddes was born in Dundee in 1850, the fifth child and only son of Agnes Young, a shoemaker's daughter, and Andrew Geddes, a tailor. At the age of sixteen Geddes took control of the family clothier's business and in 1874 married Jessie Ballantyne Hendry (1856–1946), moving shop and family to Alyth in 1882. Geddes's personal life was tragic: two of his sisters died in their early twenties, and three of his children died before him. Like other working class poets (James Hogg providing a notable example) Geddes followed a rigorous programme of self-education, being involved with several Presbyterian study groups. He was a talented amateur painter, as surviving landscapes in the Alyth Council Rooms prove. His friends included many of the leading journalists of Dundee, such as William Reid, the principal sub-editor of *The Dundee Advertiser*. Geddes published three collections of poetry: *The New Jerusalem* (1879), *The Spectre Clock of Alyth* (1886) and *In the Valhalla* (1891), as well as a *Guide to Alyth* (1913), essays for the *Weekly Sun* and *Weekly Star*, and a children's cantata, *The Babes in the Wood*, set to music by John Kerr. Furthermore, Geddes was Alyth correspondent for *The Dundee Advertiser* which was founded in 1801 by Lord Cockburn and was instrumental in the development of radicalism in Dundee. He was active in local politics as Liberal Bailie Geddes of Alyth, founder of the Alyth Working Men's party, and a member of the local Police Commission and School Board.

Traditionally the nineteenth century has been regarded as a period of poetic dearth in Scotland. According to literary folklore, nothing much happened after Scott until the twentieth-century literary renaissance. Yet recent criticism has shown this viewpoint to be seriously flawed. The canon is being dramatically reevaluated, as previously underrated writers gain the prominence they deserve. James Hogg, for instance, has been recognised as a major Scottish writer of international stature, thanks to the work of enthusiasts like Douglas Mack, Douglas Gifford and David Groves. William Donaldson has demonstrated that significant work appeared in the Victorian press; Tom Leonard's *Radical Renfrew* has shown regional collections of poetry to be of national significance. Leonard's work is particularly important here, given his identification of a neglected radical tradition in Scottish poetry. Edwin Morgan and William Finlay have demonstrated the wealth of neglected material by working class writers through this period. In short, the nineteenth century is a crucial era in the development of the Scottish literary identity.¹

Within this context, James Young Geddes stands out as a major Scottish writer who, up till now, has received little critical attention. In the nineteenth

century he was well thought of. *The Nottingham and Derby Home Reader* admired Geddes's use of Scots; *The Stirling Observer* drew attention to his satirical gifts². After his death Geddes was largely forgotten; in this century the only notices he has received are the brief, if honourable, mentions in the *Aberdeen History of Scottish literature* and Kinsley's *Modern Scottish Literature*³. His work fully deserves reassessment.

He is certainly a product of his period in many respects. As a seceder from the Established Church, for instance, Geddes adopts a typically dualistic attitude towards religion. In the tradition of mocking religious bigotry – embracing diverse viewpoints from Burns's 'Unco Guid' and 'Holy Willie's Prayer' to Robert Pollock's *The Course of Time* (1827) – he draws a sharp distinction between the genuinely religious and those who pretend to be so. *The New Jerusalem and other Poems* (1879) opens with a quotation from Carlyle which sets the tenor for the collection and its main theme of religious hypocrisy: 'the prophets preach to us, Thou shalt be happy; thou shalt love pleasant things and find them. The people clamour, Why have we not found pleasant things?'. In 'The Shoreless Sea' Geddes uses the sea as a metaphor for the self-expression he sought in religious experience, as well as the boundless possibilities of human achievement, particularly in poetry. The same image is used by other nineteenth-century writers, for instance George MacDonald in 'A Story of the Sea-Shore'⁴.

Yet Geddes offers a radical challenge to mainstream Scottish poetry. While writers like William Miller responded to the challenges of the nineteenth century by retreating into the nostalgic idyll of 'Willie Winkie' and 'The Wonderfu' Wean', Geddes aims to disturb. In this respect he belongs to the tradition of radical poetry profiled by Leonard. Geddes's work shows strong affinities with the items in Leonard's collection. Radicals like Alexander Wilson or William Finlayson shared the Dundee tailor's political attitudes. Furthermore, Geddes's work shows intriguing stylistic and thematic parallels with experimental poetry from outside Scotland, most notably that of Arthur Hugh Clough and Walt Whitman. Geddes's work, in this respect, can be seen, as a missing link between Scottish poetry of the nineteenth century and the twentieth-century renaissance.

The New Jerusalem is set within a nationalist, and at times nationalistic, environment; the poet utilises a wide range of motifs drawn from previous Scottish writers. He is equally aware of modern trends in poetic thought, and particularly attracted to the controversial. Geddes enjoys being innovative in his treatment of traditional themes. In the title poem, an angel helper takes the protagonist on a tour of heaven, in the tradition of Hogg's 'reverend fere' of 'Kilmeny' (1813) and Cella of *Pilgrims of the Sun* (1815), or Pollock's seer in *The Course of Time* (1827). 'The New Inferno', the companion piece, is a journey into hell, guided by a helpful stranger in the Scottish diabolic tradition, an alter-ego drawn in the manner of Gil-Martin in Hogg's *Justified Sinner* (1824). The stranger voices Peter's existing doubts:

Have we not, as it were, phylacteried
The prophecies, that all that run might read?
Revealed the revelations - dark to most,
But phosphorescent when explained by us? (55-8)

Such elevated language serves to deflate Geddes's targets the better. Anticipating Thatcher's 1988 'Sermon on the Mount', Geddes shows how Christ's texts are susceptible to being 'amended' and 'explained' by his devotees. In his near-Marxist condemnation of Establishment pie-in-the-sky, Geddes makes short work of the religious esotericism propounded by

The dainty priests, who only deal with those
That are not lost ...
Who deal in opiates, gentle laxatives,
And sugar-coated Christianity. (156-63)

Furthermore, he explicitly relates notions of an Elect to notions of class, condemning the Church as elitist in both respects.

Christ is not interested in 'Fireside Philanthropy' and rejects the Sabbatarian notions of the Scottish Church. As in his first incarnation, Jesus is especially kind to the wretched and rejected. He draws the people from the city and into its rural environs, drawing his lessons from nature. This pastoral slant sheds further light on Geddes's ambiguous attitude to the urban environment, as put forward in the *New Jerusalem*. Towns are productive, but in towns, he suggests, we forget our humanity. The system of economic misery is epitomised by the savings banks which enslave the poor, a motif which Geddes may have adopted from Alexander Rodger's satirical poem 'Shavings Banks'.⁵ According to Geddes, it is the urban Establishment who murder Christ. He is adept at using such provocative messages to shock his readers from their complacency.

A similar stance is adopted in another poem from the *New Jerusalem* collection, 'Balaam's Ass'; one of the few examples of Geddes writing in Scots. The poem builds on an image drawn from Numbers 22: Balaam is too short-sighted to perceive the Angel of the Lord barring his way and beats his ass for refusing to move. Finally the man sees the heavenly messenger, and agrees to turn back without harassing the people of Israel. Geddes considers what happened to the ass afterwards; did it live on 'Tae pu' the thistle' (28) or was it 'Placed atween shafts' (35) to work? Here, ass and rider clearly refer to servant (the working class) and master (the capitalist); the message is to leave God's chosen people alone. Enhancing the Scottish dimensions of the poem is the association with Jacobite song, where an insensitive rider often symbolises an insensitive Hanoverian; the persecuted mount the Scottish people. This provocative parallel is, however, left unexplored by Geddes.

While Geddes may not have fulfilled his potential as a poet in Scots for Scots, then, he was constantly experimenting with innovative poetic attitudes

To me an artificial air seems to suffuse
The whole celestial atmosphere. Throughout the place
One looks instinctively for painter's pots. It smells
Of pasteboard and theatricals. The very bees
Seem but to buzz a part. Why should they Heaven disgrace?
Bees are not bees which labour not nor store - it tells
Against the whole economy of Heaven. (93-9)

Like Clough's 'New Sinai' (1849), Geddes's 'New Jerusalem' stresses the need to satisfy one's own conscience, rather than blindly conforming to Establishment dogma. Heaven is ironically presented as a bureaucratic continuation of life on earth, governed by Presbytery records. The neo-Dantean 'New Inferno' depicts Hell as an urban environment, much as James (B.V.) Thomson had imagined his 'City of Dreadful Night' (1874):

They entered in and viewed the space of Hell which rose
Before their eyes. Nought of the green of Heaven was seen;
Lost too its harmonies and air of calm repose.
But mammoth buildings, thickly placed, with lanes between,
Gave to the place a business air. With hurried pace
The denizens went on their way, careless of grace
Or poised posture; with faces grimly set they looked
Not to the right or left, as if their errand brooked
No idling by the way. (222-30)

But there is a subtle, and ironic, variation in Geddes's picture of Heaven and Hell. People in Hades are happy, whereas the worker and the intellectual are miserable in Heaven. By implying the necessity of rest and labour for all - a credo close to William Morris's in the utopian *News from Nowhere* (1890) - Geddes stresses that every individual is responsible for the upkeep of the community. Such a viewpoint combines the Calvinist concept of the godly commonwealth with Geddes's constitutional radicalism.

Visionary poems like those discussed above, or 'The Second Advent', are firmly related to the Scottish tradition of Ramsay, Burns and Hogg. Yet Geddes's expositions of polemical themes also draw on the experimental poetry of his contemporaries. Browning's 'Christmas Eve and Easter Day' (1856), for instance, may have provided the inspiration for the last mentioned item. A sense of apocalyptic urgency is communicated as the Messiah's return is converted into a blank verse parable for the nineteenth century. One sign of the Coming, for example, is the temporary healing of the Disruption - a wryly optimistic element in Geddes's generally bleak outlook (12-19). The resonant imagery, and self-conscious pompousness, of Scottish preaching at its least attractive is vividly captured by Geddes:

and techniques. In this respect he bears a startling resemblance to Clough, who himself used the 'Balaam's Ass' image in 'Dipsychus' (1850-1). Like Clough, Geddes rejects and attacks Establishment views of religious and stylistic orthodoxy. In so doing, both poets seek to achieve a new poetic voice and, in Geddes's case at least, this is part of a wider agenda for literary and national rejuvenation.

The Spectre Clock sustains the uniquely caustic vision of Scotland already seen in *The New Jerusalem*, but adds an extra dimension. Alyth clock is a metaphor for nineteenth-century stagnation and a failure to move with the times:

For the power that the phantom has is this –
To benumb with the clock paralysis;
And the minds which its spell hath barred complete
Are a-simmer with ideas obsolete;
They move in a phantasmagoric way
The gibbering ghosts of yesterday (67-72)

James (B.V.) Thomson makes similar, if more depressing, use of this image of a clock in his 'City of Dreadful Night'. The central poem of the sequence, 'The Spectre Clock', is stylistically diverse: drawing on the rhetorical tradition of sermon and debating society, at times declamatory in the manner of the Dundee bard McGonagall but without the bathetic effect. Geddes contrasts the paralysis of the Church with his own dynamic vision of the need for a 'gifted one' to rescue the people,

Who shall sweep and scatter the dirt and dust,
And rid the wheels of their blood-red rust;
Who shall smooth the wrinkles from Time's old face,
And his withered hands in strength replace,
To set them agog with motion brisk
Anew on each renovated disk. (79-84)

Implicitly, this Saviour is Geddes, the catalytic element in a stagnating Alyth. This is an important element in Geddes's poetry: increasingly he presents himself as omniscient and omnipotent.

Although Geddes focusses on the Dundee and Alyth districts, his message has more than local relevance. 'The Glenisla Gathering' targets the sentimentalisation of the Highlands found in Scottish literature from Burns and MacPherson onwards. Nostalgia is anathema to Geddes. The landscape, the ambience and the people of 'Glenisla' are reminiscent of Clough's 'Bothy of Tober-na-Vuolich' (1848) but Geddes also draws on the Scottish burlesque tradition of Ramsay and Fergusson. We are introduced to an 'Old Inhabitant', a reminiscing rustic similar to the persona often adopted by James Hogg, for instance in 'Changes in the Habits and Conditions of the Scottish Peasantry'. There is an immense sense of local self-importance in the old man's state-

ments, but Geddes's satire is predominantly kindly in the face of such parochialism. The old man presents the Gael as degenerate; demoted from a reiver to a gillie, from a proud hero to the exploited:

Ah! this is the age of revenge and reprisals,
Now the Lowlander lieth in wait for the Highlander,
Watcheth him coming down from his home on the hill-top,
Where he scrapeth from earth a scanty subsistence; ...
And waiteth with smiles obsequious and the offer of fair words,
Not content till the coins in the Highlander's pocket
Fall with a pleasant clink into the till of his counter. (143-51)

While Geddes sympathises with the losses of Gaeldom he despises the Celtic twilight attitudes which term the Highlander the 'children of mist'. In Geddes's vision they are sacrificial victims 'ready and ripe for the callous knives of the knacker' (54-62). The ambiguities in his treatment are the product of his ironic temperament, and the Victorian environment. While Geddes refutes the Victorian idea of Progress, he can never wholly reject a notion that the past (or at least its presentation) is inferior to the present. His dichotomy is another version of the religious and national insecurities which are typical of nineteenth-century verse. Robert Buchanan and John Davidson provide two striking parallels. Geddes draws on this dilemma as a rich source for his poetry.

For instance, in 'Man and the Engine' the hero is shackled to the urban context by a horrific machine, but this machine provides his *raison d'être*. Geddes constructs a disturbing picture of their relationship (9-26). A near-lyrical quality is given to the bond between man and engine: 'the thing has sense, the thing has a soul'. But lest the reader should think he romanticises the connexion, Geddes explains that this is not a bond of love: it is a demonic pact of loathing (77-82). The engine is a metaphor for working class misery: the masses exploited by their masters and, it is implied, goaded to the point of rebellion (94-110). The beast may rise at any moment. His imagery has a surrealistic quality which gives an early indication of the Whitmanesque qualities which would prove vital in Geddes's subsequent work:

It is a monster, it is a gnome,
Confined beneath this dome,
And you see but its skeleton.
Did you gaze with me –
Gaze out from the twilight dim
Till eye and brain saw dizzily
Each moving limb –
Then would you see as well as I
Those skeleton limbs become clothed upon –
A form, a personality,
Gazing at me with vindictive eyes. (111-21)

drew on to create a new, conversational, staccato style.

'The Glory' begins by diagnosing the contemporary situation in Dundee. The city in this respect functions as a metaphor for the more extensive problems of Scotland and beyond. Despite the reforms of the nineteenth century, for example the Education Act of 1872 and the Reform of the House of Lords, Dundee still hankered after empty honorifics (11-12). Carlyle is a clear influence here, seen in the rejection of the utilitarian and the sustained attacks on the plutocracy of the city. Geddes must have been turning in his grave as Dundee celebrated its 800th anniversary.

Unmercifully, Geddes lashes out at materialism in all its manifestations: as class and caste; as procession and ranking. Local rivalries are soundly condemned: the desire to appear better than Perth for instance. And in what reads as a poignant *cri de coeur*, we learn what Dundee meant to James Young Geddes:

Mine own town,

Dear old town!

Town with the unbroken Radical history;

Town that ever stood first for reform and independence;

Town where Wallace declared the national freedom;

Town that stood for Knox and the Reformation;

Town where the tree of liberty was planted;

Town where Kinloch stands, menacing even yet in bronze unjust governments.

Dear old town! (35-43)

Exposing Dundee's degeneracy Geddes calls for public mourning; for crape to be hung on the churches and, with a passing nod to *The Spectre Clock*, on the steeples. We are given a foretaste of the heartfelt sorrow of Yeats's 'Easter 1916' in the line 'The good old town is gone, irrevocably gone, dead, vanished' (55). Lord Kinloch's appearance is symptomatic of Geddes's profound identification with Dundee's radical traditions. The 'Radical Laird' stands for all that is best in Dundee's past: the pioneering of industrial technology; the dedication to radicalism; and, perhaps most crucially, the willingness to sacrifice his position for the people before becoming Dundee's first MP.⁹ Most importantly, Geddes implies he is the man to don the mantle of radicalism which Kinloch had left behind.

Now comes an invocation of the Scottish heroes, of the sleeping saviours who wait in Valhalla to be recalled. First Carlyle (VI), but Carlyle is too mighty for such 'bald-pated' foes, and Geddes bids him goodbye, in a modest manner: 'So long Carlyle; I apologise for disturbing you.' Next, Geddes tries Burns (VII), but Burns is better occupied in the after-life than with the paltry present (83-94). As an active member of the Dundee and Aylth Burns Societies, Geddes found the national bard a major source of inspiration but, like MacDiarmid, perceived the Burns cult as disturbing. We have come full circle from the despairing accusations of *New Jerusalem* to the warrior's

The Man hates the Engine just as much as vice versa, and in his 'serpent's charm' he sees a reflexion of the human condition and, explicitly, of himself (111-21). Once again Geddes anticipates MacDiarmid, as the man cries out 'Tis I, 'Tis I', just as the Drunk Man discovers the horror he writhes in is his own soul.⁷ After this sharp cry of despair, the poem undergoes a change of tone: the engine exchanges its role of tormentor for that of tormented. The Man will not reveal his purpose (weaving) to the engine. By having the engine believe that his 'whim' alone makes it work, the man maintains his position of omnipotence (224-27). So too, it is implied, do capitalists treat their employees.

The poem is at least partly a response to Alexander Anderson's ('Surface-man') poem 'The Engine' (1878), which is 'industrial kailyard'. To be fair, Anderson could be bitter in his concern for his fellow-workers' plight, for instance in his 'Song of Labour'. Yet Geddes goes much further. 'Man and the Engine' is an incitement to industrial revolt. Geddes provides a new departure for the industrial Muse, by exploring the symbiotic relationship between worker and boss.

Undoubtedly Geddes's best poems appear in his third and final collection: *In the Valhalla*. It explores all Geddes's major themes - satires on class and the establishment; pleas for the workers - but the treatment is new, and hardened. The unifying theme of the collection is suggested in the title: *In the Valhalla* is an exploration of dead heroes. Geddes has developed from his early quest for heroes and scapegoats, seen in 'The Trinity' and 'Calvin' from *The New Jerusalem*, and is now taking personal responsibility. His ultimate work attempts to realise Geddes as a Poetic Superman. Among the prime reasons for Geddes's poetic development is his increasing adoption of the style and content of contemporary American writers, most importantly Whitman. As Edwin Morgan has shrewdly commented: 'Whitman certainly made Geddes'.⁸ In an eclectic way, again anticipating the twentieth-century renaissance, Geddes drew thematic and stylistic elements from Whitman's work. *Leaves of Grass* (1855-91) furnished Geddes with the confessional and assertive style which characterises his most memorable poetry. His admiration of Carlyle's philosophy no doubt helped Geddes to adopt Whitman's position of vigorous Poetic Hero. The restless and questioning qualities of Whitman's language, and his ability to enumerate the diverse aspects any given theme all made vast impressions on Geddes.

Armed with this new weaponry Geddes was capable of tackling major themes effectively. In 'The Farm' he draws attention to a tarnished pastoral vision of Scotland, rejecting the Romantic tradition of rural fulfilment. In 'Glendale & Co' he universalises the industrial experience, sharply differentiating between the hypocritical Industrialist and the exploited workers of the world. Perhaps Geddes's finest poem is 'The Glory has Departed', synthesising his political and religious beliefs with his desire to provoke Scotland's salvation. Finally he has fused the local, national and international styles he

position which Geddes finally advocates.

Ultimately, Geddes's verdict on the nineteenth century and on Scotland seems despairing: 'Ichabod', the Biblical term for 'the glory has departed'. But there is a cathartic quality to Geddes's profoundly humanitarian credo and he is purposely gloomy to incite action. His evangelical, radical poetry provides an assertive escape route for Scottish poetry which bypasses the wistful road of Victorianism (as evidenced from *Whistlebinkie* to Edwards's *Modern Scottish Poets* series). He provides an alternative to the Victorian ideal of *Self-Help*, epitomised in Samuel Smiles's book of that title (1859), satirising this notion in 'Thrift, thrift, thrift' (1891).¹⁰ Moreover, he goes beyond the diagnostic nature of poems like Davidson's 'Thirty Bob a Week' (1894) to offer a practical agenda for improving Scottish society and poetry.

The Dundee poet anticipates Scotland's twentieth-century literary renaissance. Like Whitman in America and Clough in England, Geddes was exploring new techniques, and radical messages, for poetry. By doing this, he sought to foster the regeneration of Scottish literature and life. James Young Geddes's full significance was missed by his contemporaries. Scottish poets of this period seem largely to have lost their way. David Gray's life, Davidson's ghastly materialism, Thomson's despair, MacDonald's effete poetry and Stevenson's *Child's Garden of Verses*: all these are examples of their failure to confront the reality of contemporary life. Geddes, in contrast, stayed in Scotland and fought for his ideals. He retained his Scottish identity and looked beyond Scotland for ideas and models. To redress the balance, then, Geddes's work richly deserves further consideration and immediate republication.

NOTES

1. William Donaldson, *Popular Literature in Victorian Scotland* (Aberdeen, 1986); Tom Leonard, *Radical Renfrew* (Edinburgh, 1990). Edwin Morgan, 'Scottish Poetry in the Nineteenth Century' and William Finlay, 'Reclaiming Local Literature: William Thom and Janet Hamilton' both appear in *The History of Scottish Literature. Vol. 3: The Nineteenth Century*, ed. Douglas Gifford (Aberdeen, 1988).
2. These reviews are included in James Young Geddes, *The Spectre Clock of Alyth and Other Selections* (Alyth, 1886). Geddes is mentioned in Henry Dryver, *Blairgowrie, Stormont and Strathmore Worthies* (Blairgowrie, 1903); D. H. Edwards, *One Hundred Modern Scottish Poets* (Brechin, 1880); Robert Ford, *The Harp of Perthshire* (Paisley, 1893) and Alan Reid, *The Bards of Angus and the Mearns: An Anthology of the Counties* (Paisley, 1907). See also the poet's obituary in *The Courier, The Blairgowrie Advertiser and The Dundee Advertiser*, in the issues of each for 1 November 1913.
3. See Morgan; Douglas Young, 'Scottish Poetry in the Later Nineteenth Century' in *Scottish Poetry: A Critical Survey*, edited by James Kinsley (London, 1955).
4. *Collected Poems* (London, 1893), I, 185.

5. Included in Alexander Rodger, *Poems and Songs* (Glasgow, 1838) and reprinted in *Scottish Satirical Verse*, ed. Edwin Morgan (Manchester, 1980).
6. *The Quarterly Journal of Agriculture* (1831), reprinted in *A Shepherd's Delight*, edited by Judy Steel (Edinburgh, 1985).
7. Hugh MacDiarmid, *Complete Poems*, ed. Michael Grieve and W.R. Aitken (London, 1978), I, 94.
8. 'Scottish Poetry in the Nineteenth Century', p. 345.
9. See Charles Tennant, *The Radical Laird* (Kineton, 1970).
10. The poem is based on Thomas Hood's 'Stitch, Stitch, Stitch': see Young.

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